

# Out of Site

Landscape architects go beyond requirements to create award winning designs that are out of this world

By April Gonzales



Spectacular gardens begin in the imagination, move to the drawing board and finally take root in the soil, becoming living and ever-changing elements of an overall architecture. From catwalks stretching fancifully over marshes to canopy covered benches surrounded by native grasses and colorful blooms, there is no doubt that a well executed garden design can be transporting.

But can it win a prize?

That question begs yet another—one that's far more general yet tremendously complex: What makes for an award-winning landscape design?

Is it the sheer beauty of eye-popping plant material used in an aesthetically pleasing and dramatic composition? The project's compatibility with modern ideas about conservation, sensitivity to the environment and sustainable development? The impact the final project may have on the profession, the public? Or, like academic exams that test the ability to take a test rather than knowledge on the subject—is it simply being savvy to the ins and outs of how to submit a winning project?

According to The New York chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects (NYASLA), the answer is: All of the above.



Three years ago, the NYASLA began its first call for entries, establishing a renowned competition open to landscape architects and firms, town regulatory agencies and professors for their academic achievements. Needless to say, in a high profile market like New York, the bar of excellence is pretty high.

All entries to the NYASLA competition are judged by a jury of professionals involved in the field of landscape architecture. And, while every consideration mentioned above weighs into the final decision, the bottom line for selection is the quality of the design.

The Honor Award, the highest accolade, recognizes a superior professional accomplishment—a project that's head and shoulders above all others. In 2005, EDAW, a Manhattan-based firm, received this award for its project at Mohegan Sun Casinos. The Merit award, second place, recognizes excellence in design. Just four landscape architectural firms earned these awards in 2005. Among them was one East End firm: Araiys Design of Southampton which made the grade with a complex design for a private residence on Shinnecock Bay.

## Making the Grade Work

Araiys's project was recognized on points that are important to the society, ranging from environmental issues to aesthetic sensibility. The company had to collaborate not only with the clients and the architect, but with several government agencies. Good communication among the parties involved was essential, as was communicating the scope of the project effectively to the jury.

Toward that end, the firm submitted a list of the plants used, photos and a report on the merits of the job. Araiys was complimented on quality of their photography, as well as their use of plant materials, the textures and stonework. Tim Rumph, the principal landscape architect of Araiys, learned the importance of presentation the hard way. The first time the company submitted the project it received recognition for the design ideas but was told to work on the photography.



Hiring a professional photographer was key to the submission, but Rumph also felt that having someone else view the landscape allowed him to see it from another perspective. The effort obviously paid off, since the resubmitted project ultimately won the award.

So what did the judges see that motivated them to bestow a coveted award? As it turns out, quite a bit.

Araiys Design's project was located on a bluff on the water in Hampton Bays. The landscape was governed by wetlands setbacks and steep grades. The design had to consider municipal regulations and environmental requirements, which many homeowners perceive as obstacles and aggravation. Needless to say, a tremendous amount of coordination and collaboration was needed. Interaction with the town, the Department of Environmental Conservation and the architect led to many parameters for the project. A tremendous amount of



preliminary research was necessary, including investigating the use of native plants which had to be approved by the Town of Southampton. The homework paid off: Ultimately, Rumph's firm was complimented by the jury on their final plant selection.

But the real challenge for Rumph was not the regulatory agencies, but the 30' changes in the grade: that was where the pool was to be located. He developed an intricate design that incorporated pilings with cross beams that helped stabilize the slope, included drainage, and prevented erosion.

Araiys's intelligent approach and design concepts led to a finished project that was a well-built environment. The pool features a surrounding walk ledge as well as a shelf indentation that provides for seating right in the water. Without a well thought out system for soil retention that pool might not stay put, therefore the technical details of retaining walls, hardscape and drainage were essential to the structural integrity of the design. Rumph emphasizes the necessity of a high level of craftsmanship

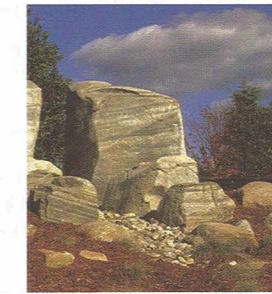
in the construction process. It is a necessary element of good design, otherwise the landscape can deteriorate rapidly. This project was truly a case of pleasing all the people all of the time: even the clients were delighted with the end result.

### Legend and Lore

Like Rumph, many landscape architects believe that really notable projects have to go beyond beauty—that superb design is not enough. The environment must engage us, stimulate us or teach us, which is exactly why the landscape designed and built by EDAW at the Mohegan Sun Casino in Eastern Connecticut received a top honor last year. The property is particularly astounding because the earth itself was literally transformed, not just by the addition of the casino and gardens. The site had previously been a nuclear fuel rod manufacturing facility. Environmental remediation and some

reforestation took place prior to EDAW's involvement. That in itself is enough to revive a site. So add to that the company's extraordinary gardens, and you have the makings of an award-winning project.

EDAW's intention was to exemplify the philosophy of the tribal elders and illustrate their reverence for nature, their spirituality and their culture—as well as to create a restorative landscape. Tom Delorm from the New York office of EDAW worked closely with the tribal council and elders over the course of the project. Like Stonehenge, the entry landscape is a moon and stars garden. A 250-foot-wide tribal circle charts 13 phases of the moon and constellations. The moon rises and sets over cleft rocks that are uplit dramatically at night. They mark various parts of the lunar cycle, the solstices and the constellations. To reflect the tribe's culture EDAW focused on the beech tree (*Fagus sylvatica*), a symbol of new life and an integral part of the tribe's lore.



The surrounding gardens at Mohegan Sun included many medicinal or otherwise useful plants. Many were used for multiple purposes—as remedies, for building, weaving or food. In the entry gardens there is a faux rock that is a scaled version of Cochregan Rock—one of the enormous glacial boulders typical of Connecticut—that was the site of ancient tribal council meetings.

The hotel garden illustrates the geology of the area and the tribe's reverence for the earth. The perennials, groundcovers and hardscape create a geological stratum pattern like a slice of soil. Wind plays among the original birch and fern glade. The rooftop terrace is linked to the spa, so EDAW created a woodland edge environment, a place of respite away from the hectic liveliness in other areas of the casino complex.

EDAW created a meaningful place that celebrates the tribe's culture. Their narrative landscape is award winning because it goes beyond aesthetics, to teach people about nature, science, culture and history.

The designs of both EDAW and Araiys show that there is more to a landscape than traditional gardens. Gardens and landscapes have become extensions of the living room, the den, the science lab, even the history class or the kitchen. It's no longer enough for a garden to be an elegant extension of the architecture, or a painting-like tableau seen from a distance—a great view out the window. Modern landscape architects have had to adjust not only to a new aesthetic, but to a new lifestyle in which the garden has become a place to live and explore.

Photography by Jeff Heatly and courtesy of EDAW

